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SUBJECT: POLITICALLY CONNECTED RELATIVES VIE FOR CHIANG MAI SENATE SEATS

REF: A) BANGKOK 2156 B)CHIANG MAI 60

¶1. (sbu) Summary: Despite a rule against candidates in Thailand's Senate election being members of a political party, several of Chiang Mai's best-known contenders are connected with the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party via either family or patronage. As in other provinces, this has led to jokes about the two houses of Parliament being renamed the Houses of Husbands and Wives. Vote-buying allegations will likely produce challenges that will fuel another turn of the electoral merry-go-round. End summary

¶2. (u) In Chiang Mai province, 39 candidates are standing for election April 19 to the 200-seat Senate. Voters select one candidate; the top five vote getters in the province win Senate seats. Candidates cannot be a member of a political party, a Senator in the preceding term or an MP less than a year before announcing candidacy. (ref a)

¶3. (sbu) With one brother serving as Chiang Mai Mayor and another as a TRT MP, Praphan Buranupakorn is considered a sure winner. A businessman, former vice president of the Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) 2004-2005 and former deputy mayor of Chiang Mai, Praphan scored the highest votes in the province in the 2001 first-round senatorial election but was disqualified for unspecified offences, understood to be vote buying. Praphan is brother to MP Pakorn Buranupakorn, who was widely considered the instigator of a March 30 attack on a Democrat Party rally in Chiang Mai before the April 2 elections (ref b). Another brother is Boonlert Buranupakorn, who became mayor of Chiang Mai in 2002, succeeding his brother Pakorn.

¶4. (sbu) As wife of Prime Minister Thaksin's brother, MP Payap Shinawatra, Pawruthai Shinawatra is also a good bet for the top five, despite limited political experience or local visibility.

¶5. (sbu) Other candidates whose TRT connections belie the no-politics-please requirements of the Senate include Udom Suwitsakdanon, Busaba Yotbangtoei Pol.Maj.Gen. Prasert Chantrapipat and Charinrat Buddhapan.
-Udom, whose family runs northern Thailand's number one cargo transport firm, served as a vice president of the PAO along with Prapan Buranupakorn; both quit to run for Senate seats.
-Busaba is the wife of an outgoing Senator, Maj Gen. Intarat Yotbangtoei, and head of the Olympic Weightlifting Committee that produced one of Thailand's two gold medals in the Athens Olympics. She ran unsuccessfully for Chiang Mai PAO president in 2004 under the TRT banner; that campaign was seen as practice for this Senate race.
-Prasert, former deputy police chief of Chiang Mai, has the support of Thaksin's sister, MP Yaowapha Wongsawat, who reportedly holds power of approval over police promotions in northern Thailand.
-Charinrat served in Parliament under the TRT banner. She ceded

her MP constituency five years ago to TRT candidate Pakorn Buranupakorn in exchange for a place on the TRT party list. She did not run in the 2005 election, probably with an eye on the Senate.

16. (sbu) Comment: Today's polling day brought many allegations of vote-buying that will likely produce challenges to at least three of the top contenders -- Praphan, Udom, and Busaba -- followed by a second round election. Here too the front runners have plenty of political experience: both Praphan and Busaba's husband's victories were challenged in the 2000 election; Busaba's husband won in the second round while Praphan did not.

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